

The INQUIRER

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians

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FAITH IN WORDS



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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

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Editor's View

UU Church shootings

Sanctuary.

It was difficult to hear that word, spoken by the gruff police chief. "The gunman entered the sanctuary," he said, at the Tennessee Valley press conference.

Sanctuary.

It is what we seek when we come to church and what we as a church extend to others. The congregation at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church became victims in their own sanctuary on 27 July. Sanctuary.

It's what Greg McKendry died offering, standing between the gunman and other church members. There is no doubt that he saved lives while giving up his own. Linda Kraeger, too, was struck in the first volley of shots and later died. At press time, four other victims were fighting for their lives.

Sanctuary.

Police say that's why the gun man did it. Because of the Unitarian Universalist liberal tradition, because the Tennessee Valley congregation supports gay and lesbian people, in their pursuit of equal rights.

Tennessee Valley is a 'Welcoming Congregation', a church which has made the commitment to welcome all people without regard to their sexuality and to offer them a place where they can honestly express who they are.

Sanctuary.

It is what many sought after the gunman was taken away. An interfaith vigil was held on Monday, 28 July. The Rev William Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, reminded those gathered that welcoming is an essential part of our faith:

'To the extent that (the gunman) took issue with some of the stands of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, and Unitarian Universalism in general... We live in a society where there are differences of opinion, and Unitarian Universalism and our congregations here have a long history of standing on the side of love, of standing up for justice and saying everyone should be welcome, and saying that we are churches that welcome all souls, not just some souls. And that's a deep religious calling for us, and the Tennessee Valley church and the Westside church and Unitarian Universalism are not going to change living our religion that way. ...

'And you know what? More of the people in this sanctuary here tonight, would say the same things: that we need to be willing to stand up and stand on the side of that larger love which can help us move through these difficult times, resulting from this tragedy, but [also] these difficult times for our world, right now.

'And we're not going to stop, and you can't stop it. You can't allow your fear or your confusion or your sorrow, or your anger – you can't allow any of those emotions to keep you separated from what is central to your living, however you express it religiously.

'This gathering here tonight is a hopeful gathering and I am very glad that I am here. Even though it's in the midst of tragedy. Because this gathering here tonight represents our greatest hope. Because there is no capacity that we need more than the ability to come together as people of faith across the boundaries of theology and liturgy and practice that we are so often told must keep us apart. There is no capacity that is more important than for us to be able to be together as one community. Because in the face of great tragedy, human beings, time after time, have done exactly this ...' Sought sanctuary.

– MC Burns

This colour double-issue of 'The Inquirer' was sponsored by The Inquirer Board. 'The Inquirer' will skip the next fortnightly issue for a summer break and will return on 6 September.

No Unitarian 'right belief'

Authentic faith is our task

The attempts to articulate what Unitarians believe are futile says **David Usher**. The struggle is to live authentic faith in true experience.

How many of you have experienced a conversation which goes something like this. "Oh, you are a Unitarian? What do you Unitarians believe about...?" You fill in the blanks: What do you believe about Jesus? What do you believe about the Bible? The resurrection? Life after death?

To be fair to the people who ask that question, "What do Unitarians believe about..." Or even, "What do YOU believe about..." they are only following what has been the Christian orthodoxy for centuries because Christianity has, from its earliest days, defined itself according to right belief. Whether you are a Christian, whether you will be saved, and – at some wretched times in Christian history – whether you will be burned at the stake, has been decided by whether you subscribe to the correct doctrine, whether you say you believe the right things.

In many ways, it is understandable that Christianity should have evolved thus. The Jews expected a Messiah – a political or military leader – to rescue them from the oppression of the Romans. Instead, along came Jesus, preaching his enigmatic teachings. And then, in spite of the enthusiasm with which he had been greeted, when he went up to Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish faith and political centre of the Roman forces, it all went very wrong. And he was crucified. Apparently he was not the Messiah after all.

But then, curiously, miraculously, those first disciples began to interpret the whole Jesus event in a new way. To see victory in apparent defeat; triumph in apparent humiliation; power in apparent weakness. Perhaps, they wondered, Jesus had been the Messiah. But how to explain this paradox? And so the early Christian fathers, the first theologians who set about explaining this great mystery, tried to square the circle. A man who had been God. Life which conquered death. Paul, the first theologian and emissary, began the process, which was then picked up by Justin Martyr, Origen, and many, many more. Influenced as they were by the disciplines of Greek philosophy, and trying to make this new Christianity appeal to the Hellenistic world, those first theologians philosophised. They argued with each other over endless detail. And then they held councils, at Nicaea, at Chalcedon, and they agreed on what would become the official doctrines of the church. Doctrines which have remained ossified ever since, creeds which have been repeated by the faithful, word for word, Sunday by Sunday, ever since.

What do you believe?

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages,



Abraham and Isaac Before the Sacrifice (Detail, 1642 Jan Victors 1619-1676) Among the Abrahamic faiths, only Christianity pursues 'right belief'.

God from God, Light from Light, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.

And so it goes, the Nicene Creed. Now, I suspect, most modern day Christians don't actually believe it. Their saying of the creed is not really a statement of belief; it is a way of participating, belonging to the community of the church, and none the worse for that. But the point is, Christianity is defined by what you say you believe. Not how you act, not how you behave, not by the sanctity of your soul or the piety of your person, but by what you say you believe.

No belief test in Islam or Judaism

The two other Abrahamic religions are quite different. Judaism is not a religion of beliefs, it is a religion of identity, of traditions and stories. You are a Jew, essentially, if you are part of retelling of those stories, the re-enactment of the traditions. Shabbat. The Holy Days.

Islam is not a religion of beliefs either; it is a religion of practice. You are a Muslim if you submit yourself to the five pillars – if you declare Allah as One, and Muhammad as his prophet; if you say prayers, if you observe Ramadan, if you give alms, and if you go on the hajj to Mecca. Theology is secondary to Islam, as it is to Judaism. Both are religions based on actions and rituals. Only Christianity is based on beliefs.

So, it is not surprising that Unitarianism, arising as it did primarily from Christianity, should also have defined itself by beliefs. Belief in the oneness of God. Belief in the humanity of Jesus. Belief in the use of reason, in the primacy of the individual conscience in matters of faith. The early Unitarian theologians in Britain, Transylvania and North America all thought their way to their positions, arguing for the rightness of their beliefs as opposed to the wrongness of others' beliefs.

This emphasis on right belief is with us still in some Unitarian circles – as if we should have our own Council of Nicaea, decide the question once and for all, and banish those who vote on the minority side. We might be rather more lenient on the losers than others have been before us, but the principle would be the same. Believe right; or you are not one of us and

(Continued on next page)

Community helps us live our faith

(Continued from previous page)

out you go.

And even those of us who shy away from such doctrinal orthodoxy sometimes fall into the trap when we talk of ourselves by our beliefs. We believe whatever we like, some of us say. No wonder people are so confused, when we mislead them so egregiously.

Because here is the truth of the matter: Unitarianism is not about Right Belief. Beliefs are important, as Sophia Lyon Fahs observes, because as we believe so do we act. But Unitarianism is not a faith of Right Belief. And the sooner we stop pretending that it is, the better. When it comes right down to it, I don't care what you believe as a Unitarian. And I don't even care what I believe as a Unitarian because most of the time I don't know what I believe. Unitarianism is not about Right Belief.

So what is Unitarianism about?

True Experience

Each of us experiences the world, each in ways unique to us. Nobody else has the experiences we have. Each of us accumulates triumphs and troubles as we become the people we are. In the wonderful novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Congolese natives amongst whom the book is set do not resent the scars, physical or emotional, which to the eyes of the American intruders are disfigurements. Because the scars are signs that they have lived. The scars tell the story of the life, a visible biography. Like the velveteen rabbit, becoming real as it becomes worn. So it is that all experience, whether we deem it welcome or woeful at the time, becomes the grist out of which we are made. And it is the spirituality of maturity to welcome all guests who come to your door.

For the most part, our experience of life and the world remains superficial. We skate along. We waste our powers getting and spending. We keep our noses to the grindstone. We are happy, or not. We are productive, or not. We do what we do, and we do it without expending any great effort in going deeper. And that's fine.

However, that experience of life – whatever it is – is our life. We have no other. And religion is our collective reflection on our experience.

For example: I witness the miracle of a pink-blushed sunrise. I marvel at this awesome creation and I am made to wonder. How did it come to be, this wonderful world? How is it that there is anything at all? And most especially, how and why have I been graced with the gift of life? I encounter suffering, seemingly pointless, random suffering; and in my rage or my pain I try to make sense of it, I try to put it into a rational framework which will make it bearable.

Or I betray my own best principles, and become aware of my own deficiencies, am exposed as the fraud I feared I was and I have to acknowledge my need for forgiveness, by myself and by others. And others betray me, I am hurt and disappointed by the fickleness of others, and I am challenged to offer them the forgiveness I would want from them.

And then I am confronted by injustice, and I am called upon to speak out for what I know is right, even if my heart trembles.

All of these experiences of life accumulate to make me who I am, and my religion is my attempt to make sense of it, to

weave it into a fabric of loveliness and order. It is my endeavour that these experiences should be the process of my continuing creation as I open myself up to life, rather than to my destruction as I close myself down to cynicism and despair.

Authentic Faith

Unitarianism might have evolved from Christianity's fascination with Right Belief, and we might still occasionally fall into the trap of describing ourselves according to beliefs. But it no longer serves us well, no longer describes who we are or what we aspire to be. Being a Unitarian today is not about having the right belief; it is about having an authentic faith.

Authentic faith means that you are permitted, encouraged, to take your own unique experience of life and to craft it into your own understanding which makes sense to you, which sustains you in your times of crisis, which inspires you in your moments of doubt, which challenges you out of your timidity. You might choose to do that using the prism of liberal Christianity because that is the prism through which you see most clearly, which casts the rainbow whose colours most closely match the silhouette of your soul. Or you might choose to do it through the ritualised traditions of earth-centred spirituality, or the rationalistic rigours of scientific humanism or the quiet contemplations of meditative mysticism. Or you might mix and match. You don't have to conform your unique experience of life to the beliefs which someone else has articulated as a result of their unique experience of life. You may develop a system of intellectual beliefs, if that is your bent, or you may refrain from attending too closely to the beliefs of the mind, preferring instead to remain with the experiences of the heart.

But you do that within a community, the centripetal force of which is not conformity of belief but commonality of purpose, the purpose of making life holy by our attentiveness to it. We come together in worship not to recite stagnant creeds but to be in the presence of the divine, to cast our lives in the crucible of reverence, to be reminded of values the world would otherwise make us forget.

Listening expands our journey

We do it within a community in which we listen to the authentic experiences of others, that we may learn of the journeys others are travelling and in doing so, expand our own journey. We are made more aware that ours is not the only true experience. We are warned against the solipsism of thinking our experience defines all experience. Participation in community is the necessary safeguard against the narcissism of looking only at oneself.

We do it within a community which is dedicated to the proposition that authentic faith is not only about introspective reflection on the self, but active involvement in the world. We come together not to escape the world and its wickedness, not to congratulate ourselves on enjoying the privileges of those exclusively saved, but to understand the role we must play in the world as active agents of its universal salvation.

Our identity as Unitarians is not to have right belief. It is to have authentic faith. Faith which is true to our experience of life, which makes sense of that life, and which sustains, challenges, inspires and comforts us in that life.

The Rev David Usher is London District Minister.

These Unitarian chickens can fly

By Ant Howe

In his book *The Shortest Distance*, the Rev Bill Darlison tells the story of the eagle which grew up with chickens:

"He lived his whole life like a chicken because *that's what he'd been told he was, and that's what he thought he was.*"

I know I can relate to that. Isn't it strange how sometimes, even many years later, the things that others have said to us or about us years ago can still hold us back? How many of us have carried into adulthood some of the negative things that we were told in our younger days?

That we weren't clever enough... we didn't look right... or speak well enough...

How many of us have lived our lives a certain way because others have told us that's how we should live? How many of us have never truly learnt to fly because we didn't think we were capable of it?

Perhaps we've spent our lives wishing we could manage something but something or someone held us back.

In the Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy, we find two verses which compare God to a mother eagle who helps her young to fly. To me, that's beautiful imagery. But what does it mean to learn to fly? And what is stopping us doing it?

For some of us, it might firstly mean letting go of some of that baggage we have accumulated over so many years that is so heavy and that drags us down. How can we possibly learn to fly today if we're still carrying so much weight from the past? For others, it might mean daring to embrace a different view or image of God from the one that you were told was the only possible and acceptable one to believe in.

It might mean starting to believe in yourself a little more and realising that you are capable – that actually, you're quite a nice person!

Maybe you were brought up to believe that you were a miserable sinner and the only thing you could possibly do was crawl before the throne of God on the day of judgement and hope that he wouldn't send you straight to hell because you'd believed enough.

But thank God for the blessed truth we learn in Unitarianism! Our Unitarian forebears reasoned that if God is good and God is love then God would never cast someone aside for all eternity... Now I realise that Unitarians have many different ideas about God but I believe, and I fully believe, that there is something of God in everyone; that we are all connected to God (even if sometimes it feels like we're just hanging by a thread!).

And, that when we really begin to understand that we are intimately connected with the Source of All Life, then we can start to fly... and nothing that anyone has said to us or about us can hold us back.

But what about learning to fly *together*?

Well, I'm no great expert but when – in the autumn – I look around at the flocks of birds circling around getting ready to migrate, I wonder: why don't they crash into each other? Somehow they've learnt to fly together. They're sensitive to the direction they need to go.

Now maybe what we do as a religious community will never be as graceful as a flock of birds, but when we work together to get something done, when we worship together, when we're really sensitive to each other – then surely we're doing all the



If we believe we are eagles, then we can fly. Photo by Vivek Chugh

right things we need to do in order to be able to soar together as the mother eagle teaches her young to do.

Can we, as Unitarians, really learn to fly together given the variety of beliefs that exist in our movement? Can we still learn to fly together if we don't all think the same and believe the same thing? Can we still learn to fly together if we have reached different conclusions?

Well, again I'm no expert – but it would seem to me that learning to fly together is all about being sensitive to those around you. Still being an individual of course, but realising that you're sharing the journey with others and that flying straight across another's path with no thought for them or the journey that they might be on has the potential to bring you back down to earth with an almighty bump!

I'd much rather exist side by side with someone and travel in harmony, rather than cutting straight across their ideas and beliefs and causing us both to crash!

So where does all this leave us? Well I don't know about you, but I don't want to look on my life and realise that I never learnt to fly. That I lived my life as a chicken because that's what people told me I was and that's what I thought I was! I don't want to look up one day and realise that I've missed the blessings that God had for me because I was too scared to leave the ground.

At the same time, I don't want to fly alone. I want my friends, my partners in faith to fly with me. I know it will take some practice and I know that it means being very aware of what's going on around me! But if we *can* manage it, then think of the distances we could cover! Think of the journeys we could go on!

Where will we go? Well who is to know where our journey might take us? I for one am not too worried about setting a destination yet... first let's learn to fly!

I can't deny that there are fewer Unitarians now than there were 50 years ago. I can't deny that some of our churches have closed and that others are at risk of closing. Yet there is a sense of excitement within our movement that wasn't there a few years ago. There's a positive buzz in the air. Maybe we're finally about to learn to fly... I pray it may be so.

The Rev Ant Howe is minister at Kingswood and Warwick. This column is adapted from a sermon he preached at those churches.

EC on Late Night Prowl in Parliament

Last month, Executive Committee (EC) members met in London for their regular two-day meeting – but this time with a special feature. Sir Peter Soulsby, the Convener, hosted the EC for an evening meal at his workplace, enabling a rare night-time wander around the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Action Plan in Development

As a means of ensuring the growth and development of our communities and to establish clear priorities for the work of our staff and volunteers, the Executive Committee spends time at each of its meetings refining an Action Plan to guide the work of the General Assembly. It is always a ‘work in progress’ – but a current version will be presented to the Annual Meetings.

Valuing and Supporting Ministry

The valuing and support of our spiritual leaders was an important concern in discussions between the EC and the Ministerial Fellowship at the 2008 Annual Meetings in Hatfield. Dialogue has continued and a consultation with active ministers was held on 1 July in Birmingham. There will be a follow-up event at the same location on Thursday 13 November – with all ministers and lay pastors invited to attend to develop this important work.

- Marking the priority the EC gives to this, it has been agreed that “Valuing and Supporting Ministry” is to be the theme of the Annual Meetings in Chester in 2009.
- One immediate innovation is that the General Assembly is funding the provision of an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) for all active ministers and lay pastors. The EAP will provide confidential telephone support from an external body of professional advisers to members and their families in a wide variety of areas - including stress, debt, career and legal. It also covers the cost of some face to face counselling.

Annual Meetings Continue to Focus on Growth

The inspiring Growth Day that was a feature of this year’s Annual Meetings at Hatfield is to be followed up by a daughter of Growth Day to be held on Friday

17 April 2009 at the Annual Meetings in Chester. The day will again include the Anniversary Service in the evening at which the preacher will be the Rev Margaret Kirk.

Growth Day II will include the sharing of success and best practice from growing congregations and the very popular focus on congregations will continue during the business meetings.

Honorary Members

The EC is delighted to announce that two of our spiritual leaders are to be awarded Honorary Membership of the GA at Chester – the Revs J Eric Jones and James McClelland.

In future all Honorary Members – past and present – will be listed properly on a special ‘Roll of Honour’ on the GA Website rather than the Annual Report.

New Director of Operations Completes Staff

Former banker **Sarah Collins** joins the GA as Director of Operations this month completing a trio of new women on the staff at Essex Hall. Sarah will support the Chief Executive supervising finance and human resources. Her work experience includes stints at Barclays, UBS and the Churches Conservation Trust. She is no stranger to church matters being a Vicar’s daughter!

Fenella Fyle has been on board since 16 June as Finance Assistant including the Ministers Payroll Calculation Service among her responsibilities. She has a background in general accounts and payroll, having worked in the accounts department at Rail Gourmet for eight and a half years until the company relocated. Fenella enjoys traveling and is currently working towards a degree in accounting at London South Bank University in her spare time.

Since May the CE’s phone has been answered by his new PA **Mary Jean Douglas**, who may sound a little unusual having lived for some years in South Africa despite being a Scot by birth! Mary Jean’s last position was as PA to the Canon of St George’s Cathedral. She is taking a vacation in September not to be away from Unitarians but in order to tie the knot with her fiancé.

Hon Treasurer Needed

Martin West will step down as Hon Treasurer at the Annual Meetings in Chester and an appropriate opportunity will be found to thank him for his invaluable

service to the General Assembly particularly during the recent challenging years for Assembly finances. The EC is encouraged that he will continue to assist the movement through other financial roles such as his position as Treasurer of the Ministers Pension Fund.

Names are being sought to be considered as the next Treasurer and expressions of interest would be welcomed by the Chief Executive. Martin's successor's work will be considerably less arduous thanks to the financial management skills that will be provided by the new Director of Operations.

Internet Developments

Targeted email announcement lists have been created to replace the old GA email list. Further details and a sign-up facility can be found on the GA website. A facility for open discussion emails list is also available and discussion lists on worship and youth have already been created. Other discussion or announcement lists can be created depending on interest and need. For more information, please email Peter Teets at pteets@unitarian.org.uk.

A major overhaul of the structure of the GA website is underway to increase the likelihood of web search engines steering inquirers in our direction even if they do not yet realise we are what they are looking for.

GA Mileage Rate

Aware of the significant increases in motoring costs, the Executive Committee agreed an increase in the mileage rate at which persons doing GA business are reimbursed, for use of their own vehicle, from 25 pence to 30 pence.

Although the recommended rate for persons leading worship is not due for review until the Annual Meetings, the EC suggest that congregations and district associations consider increasing their rate based on the GA mileage rate.

Overseas Roll of Ministers

An Overseas Roll has been created to recognise persons chosen as ministers by overseas congregations of Unitarian communities with whom we have a historic relationship. Inclusion on this roll is based on an interview by the GA Panel and an appropriate level of training for the particular situation. As the requirements are more modest than for our ministry in the UK, further training would normally be required from any person on the overseas roll who wished to be considered for a ministry in the UK.

Recognition of Ministers

The EC was delighted to approve the following recommendations from the Ministry Commission:

Stephen Lingwood is added to the GA Roll as a Minister with Probationary Status

Ray Seal is added to the GA Roll at a Lay Pastor with Probationary Status

Full Status as Ministers is awarded to *the Rev Jane Barracough, the Rev Linda Phillips and the Rev Sarah Tinker*

Quota for Congregational Contribution

The EC approved an increase in the minimum requested congregational contribution per member from £22 to £23 for the coming financial year. Whilst lamenting the inflationary pressures that require such increases, the EC did note that the GA quota contribution remains significantly lower than that asked by other denominations!

Young Unitarian People

The need to obtain a domain address for the soon-to-appear special website for our youth inspired the Youth Panel to adopt the acronym YUP, abbreviated from Young Unitarian People as the informal name for the web presence.

"Young Unitarian People" is also to be the theme of the 2010 Annual Meetings in Nottingham where the opening ceremony will be in the hands of our young people. In preparation, a portion of all the weekends in the National Youth Programme will focus on developing worship, culminating in an afternoon worship experience led by youth at the 2009 Annual Meetings.

EC Begins Preparation for New EC

With less than a year of service to go, the Executive Committee is already making plans for the transition to Version 2.0 of the EC. As only half of the present EC are considering standing for re-election, there are definitely opportunities for new candidates to be elected. An induction process is being planned for early next year to enable the new EC to hit the ground running.

The Rev Steve Dick is the Chief Executive of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

Richard Price's legacy pushes us to



Richard Price was ridiculed for his views. The cartoon, published by H. Humphrey in 1790 bore the caption: *Smelling out a rat; or the atheistical-revolutionist disturbed in his midnight 'calculations'.* Courtesy of the US Library of Congress archives.

By Andy Pakula

The most famous minister of this congregation, Richard Price arrived here as minister in 1758 – 250 years ago. He was an amazing man – a renowned preacher who regularly addressed large crowds in the Newington Green Unitarian Church. He was a philosopher, who wrote significant works on the nature of freedom and ethics. He was interested in science and his knowledge in that area was considerable – both Joseph Priestly and Benjamin Franklin conferred with him about their own scientific explorations. That would be enough for any regular intellectual superman, but Price's abilities were not limited to excellence in three fields...

Price was also an economist, who not only wrote on that subject but was sought after at the end of the American Revolution by the new US government who wanted him to help run their economy. And, Richard Price was also a mathematician and his particular interest was probability. In fact, Price is credited with the work that underlies the modern life insurance industry. Richard Price knew how to figure the odds!

Bold in defence of freedom

Price was obviously brilliant – a true renaissance man – but, there was another essential component to his character: courage. Richard Price showed extraordinary boldness when freedom and justice were at stake. Now, some of us may *appear* courageous. Take me for example, what may look to the uninformed like courage is usually simple ignorance – it comes

down to the fact that I don't know the chance I'm taking when first I begin to act. Usually, with a bit more thought, I'd be quaking in my boots.

But Price, I think, was different. When in 1789 he spoke of "kingdoms... starting from sleep, breaking their fetters, and claiming justice from their oppressors" – he did not do so ignorant of the impact his words might have. This was a sermon where he used the word "probability" no less than nine times!

When he suggested that the British government of his time was a "...government by corruption – a government carried on and supported by spreading venality and profligacy through a kingdom," he did not use these strong words without a very good idea of what they might bring about.

Richard Price knew about probability. He knew about chance. He knew about risk.

Richard Price's well-calculated risks contributed to changes that eventually affected the entire world. Price always took the side of individual freedom. He is credited with helping to bring about the American declaration of independence and personally knew several of the founders of that land across the Atlantic.

Inspired Mary Wollstonecraft

And in 1789, when Price preached words of support for the French Revolution and individual human rights – when he rejected the power of the hereditary monarchy, his sermon drew angry condemnations. These, in turn, led Mary Wollstonecraft

e risks for justice

— who customarily sat in Newington's second pew — to jump to the defence of her friend and minister. In response, she wrote "A Vindication of the Rights of Man" and later, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." And thus feminism was born — gestated right there in pew number 19.

Price might have appreciated these words from poet Diane Ackerman:

*The great affair, the love affair with life,
is to live as variously as possible,
to groom one's curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred,
climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills
every day.*

*Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and un-
yielding,
and, despite all its dimensions, valleys, pinnacles, and de-
tours,
life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography,
only a length.*

*It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery,
but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.*

Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and un-
yielding.

This congregation has — deep at its core — encoded in its DNA — built into the marrow of its bones — a willingness to take risks. Perhaps this stems from its beginnings in the 17th century, when its non-conformist founders risked and met persecution at the hands of the established church just to practise their faith and to be true to their convictions. Whatever the origin, that spirit certainly continued through Richard Price's bold support of freedom.

Taking risks for progress

There is nothing easy about taking chances, even when, as for the Newington Green Unitarians, a willingness to accept risk flows in your very lifeblood. It is much more comfortable to move in tiny incremental steps, where we don't risk nearly so much. But, as an old proverb says, "It doesn't work to leap a 20-foot chasm in two 10-foot jumps."

Being truly religious is not about being comfortable. It is about a deep commitment to a better vision of the future. It is about a level of caring for the world that makes you vulnerable and exposed. It is about taking chances, and become uncomfortable for love.

With risk, there is something to be gained and the possibility — sometimes even the near certainty — that something will be lost. You might be asked to risk your reputation or your social status for the sake of justice. You might be asked to wager your safety for the possibility of liberty.

What will you risk for justice? What will you bet for freedom? What will you gamble for love? The great Richard Price taught us by his example. Figure the odds, and when the payoff is right — make your wager. It is the only way to change the world.

Andy Pakula is student minister at Newington Green and Unity Unitarian congregations in London. This is an excerpt from his sermon delivered to celebrate the recent Newington Green Tercentenary.

Prayers

By Tony McNeile

Let us open our hearts to prayer — reach for the inner stillness at the core of our being where our strength can be found.

Here is the strength that can overcome the calamities of our daily living — the disappointments, the hurts and all that discourages us from being the person we want to be.

Dwell on this place of strength and acknowledge its presence. This is the place that knows we are individuals with free minds; that knows we are more than the sum of our parts; that our spirit is from a larger, wider world that knows God and angels and holds a sense of purpose.

Feel that spiritual link connecting our lives to so much more than just ourselves — to the beauty of the earth, the colour and fragrance of summer; connecting us to the peoples of the world and the needs they have; connecting us to the divine plan that seeks to build a kingdom of heaven here on earth.

In our prayer let us open the window in our hearts that lets in the warm spring air of love and gratitude.

Soak in the scents and sights of love which please us so much and fill our lives with joy — love of where we live, the people in our lives, the animals and the birds that are part of our garden and our households.

And let us be thankful for all the wonderful things that come into our lives because we are loving; thankful for the little miracles, thankful for the love we receive in return.

And thankful too that sometimes we are able to help others. It may only be a smile; it may only be an understanding look; a comforting hand but they make good connections. Maybe the only connection a person will receive that day.

And if our optimism is low and the world is closing in and threatening, then let our prayer reach direct to the hem of our God, feel the strength, feel the understanding, the love that flows from it. Ask for nothing more but let the spirit of God flow in — loving, caring, forgiving, asking no price, demanding no explanation. Simply offering the hand that will take yours and lift you up and let you stand on your own.

The Rev Tony McNeile, of Bolton, is National Unitarian Fellowship minister.

Our lives are made up of choices

It's the small choices in our lives that add up to big ones, even in our spiritual lives says **Rowan Songsmith**

Choice and choices. As Hamlet said: "To be or not to be – that is the question." And if we choose to be, to live, if we choose life, then the next basic choice is – what do we do with our time here on Earth? So how do we choose – what *do* we do with our time here? What can choice mean for our spiritual lives? Choice theory says that we behave in such a way as to live life as closely as possible to one that we have in our minds, in which we rank those things that are important to us.

Of course, we are born in a particular place to particular people and have a sex, a colour, and so on, that we haven't chosen. However, within our limits, we make relevant choices all the time. Choice theory says that the choices we make in the small things influence the choices we make in the big things – because of how we feel, because of our emotions.

Eve in the garden, in the Biblical creation myth, was tempted, and she was given a choice – to eat the apple that was offered or not to eat the apple that was offered. Maybe she was just hungry, but maybe she was dazzled by the wondrous serpent which appealed to her emotions. In any case, she had to choose. I believe the story is an allegory of growing up, coming away from an authority figure and making your own choices and decisions. Eve's decision, once she had eaten the apple, began a whole series of other choices. So, one choice may influence our whole lives.

Apples feature heavily in our myths and stories, such as the golden apple of discord in the Iliad, which causes mayhem if not dealt with. And, in many fairy stories – traditional teaching tools and warnings about the way life is conducted – there is often the granting of three wishes. That often ends up with trouble, like the story of the old parents who were given three wishes, and they wished for their dead son to come back to them. That desire, of course, is common and very strong in many people – we wish people hadn't died and that they were still here. But in the story, when the couple's son came back, he was a dead person, a zombie you might say. They had to use their last wish to wish him dead again. The moral being: be careful what you wish for; be careful what you choose.

Conversely, in the novel *The Dice Man* by psychologist Luke Rhinehart, the hero lives by the random casting of dice and those decisions made by the fall of the dice are supposed to give him freedom to access different sides of his personality. It is an interesting concept – think how different our lives might be if we all did that. For example, what about those important choices in life, like getting married? But surely, if we threw dice to decide and we then realised that decision wasn't the one we wanted, we'd ignore it and do what we wanted to do anyway! It's the same way that we can ignore reason – because we're human and our choices are often made on the basis of our emotions and not necessarily our reason. Otherwise, how do totally unsuitable people end up together, and then break up? That's a choice not

made through reason. But if all our choices were based on reason, we probably wouldn't exist. No-one would have a baby if we thought it through purely on reason.

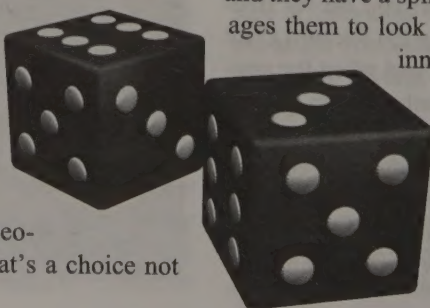
Kierkegaard, the philosopher, said that the actual moment of choice, the point at which we make a decision, is always based on emotion and is not rational. Choice is inevitable and we never know quite what our choice will mean until we have lived it. Therefore, because we are emotional beings, we have to learn to bring our reason to bear on our choices (even though it doesn't always work). So we have various thoughts on choice, lots of examples in culture, lots written about choice, and of course, lots of pseudo-choices to make in our daily lives – like choosing between loads of different breakfast cereals which are all really the same, or between rubbish and rubbish on the TV, or between political parties.

But what does choice mean for our spiritual life? We don't always have a choice over religions and spiritual traditions either. We are brought up within a particular tradition and when that is bound up with our culture, it is difficult to throw off. The Jesuits, the Roman Catholic order of priests, say "Give me a child till he's 7 and I will give you the man," meaning that a child can be so deeply indoctrinated, that whatever he or she has been taught will stay with them forever. Even if they later decide to analyse and question their belief system, it will be very difficult to overcome. Some, of course, simply 'change hats' and embrace a different orthodoxy without analysing and questioning it, because it doesn't have the cultural and personal baggage of the one into which they were born. And, even if we have rejected the orthodoxy, Christianity is quite deeply embedded in our culture. And, like Eve, we can still carry a vague feeling that we are somehow to blame.

It must be similar for anyone with a background in other religions and cultures who doesn't conform to their teachings.

These days, many people cannot take on board all of the teachings of whichever religion into which they were born, beliefs such as gays being inferior, or women being inferior, and so on. So they simply ignore the ideas with which they disagree. Humanists have had a hard time in demonstrating that they don't need faith to be people of integrity and sound moral ethics. But whether we choose to reject orthodox religion or not, we still don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Many people need to have some form of spiritual expression, whether it's singing and dancing, praying or meditating, or meeting up with like-minded people. Of course, in many cases, old religious beliefs have been superseded by people choosing to believe in angels, universal energy or light and so on – beliefs which may not have a sound theological backing. This may not matter, except to those who feel it necessary to have a sound theological backing for their beliefs. But reason makes us doubt and question these beliefs too – just as it does with orthodox religion. But if that's what people choose to do, and they have a spiritual practise that calms them, that encourages them to look within, that allows them to confront their inner selves and then to act on that spiritual belief and practise, for peace and justice in the world, that's all to the good. People must be free to find their own spiritual path through life, and I would far rather have people who choose to believe what I might think were strange ideas (and

(Continued on next page)



Youth Department News

YUP Logo Competition

Soon the Youth Programme will be launching a brand new website called YUP (Young Unitarian People). It will provide information about all our youth weekends, events, initiatives, resources, views and experiences of young people.

We would like anyone under the age of 18 to have a go at designing our logo. It needs to be imaginative, lively, include the letters YUP and the words Young Unitarian People. It should be designed in two versions – one in colour and one in black and white. It should be sent to John Harley as a Jpeg file by 15 September (jharley@unitarian.org.uk). There will be a stunning prize for the successful design: a choice of two free tickets to a theme/pleasure park in the UK or a music/book token.

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH!

Blah, the name of the youth programme in the South is re-branding! It will be split into two new age groups: Uniteens – a youth initiative for Unitarians aged 12-17, a group that meets monthly on a Sunday afternoon at Unity Church, Islington and Unikids – the new name for youth weekends for 7-11 year olds in the South. Of course young Units from all over the country are welcome to join us.

For more information about any of the above please contact John Harley (GA Youth Coordinator) at jharley@unitarian.org.uk

Making good choices

(Continued from previous page)

who might think that I had strange ideas), but who, because of that, live a life of integrity, than those who follow a rigidly prescribed path and yet are still somehow uncaring, or exclusive or hypocritical.

We need to look within and question ourselves and our actions in order to live a life that is truthful. Part of spirituality is surely about coming to terms with what has been called our dark side – dealing with it, not choosing to ignore it. And of course, we still can learn from spiritual traditions in this day and age. The Guru Granth Sahib says that truth is high, but higher still is truthful living. And Jesus said to take the log out of our own eyes before we can see clearly to take the speck out of someone else's, i.e. we must be our true selves before we can act with integrity. So let us look both within and without. Choices are inevitable and we never know what our choice will mean until we have lived it; whatever we choose to do with our time here, let us choose to live with integrity, and with passion, tempering our choices with reason. We are living, breathing, passionate, sometimes reasonable, creatures, and whatever our limitations, we can always choose to live life to its fullest and to live it with joy!

Nasruddin, the Wise Fool from the stories of the Sufi tradition, says: 'When you have two options, choose the third!'

Rowan Songsmith is a member of the Leicester Unitarian fellowship. This is an excerpt of a talk she gave at a recent meeting of the fellowship.

Global Chalice Lighting for August 2008

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists announces the 60th in its monthly series of global chalice lighting readings. Congregations worldwide are invited to participate. We ask each congregation to use the reading for at least one worship service in the month, identifying it as the "Global Chalice Lighting" for that month and naming the group which submitted it. It is hoped that the ICUU Global Chalice Lighting Project will enhance the worship experience in our congregations and raise awareness of the international dimensions of our religious movement.

Do not rebuke an old man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father; treat young men as brothers, old women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity; and give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.

If we endure in these, our hearts will remain pure.

Listen to each other.

*Greet those who love us in the UU faith
Grace be with you all.*

– Alice Magara

Unitarian Universalist Church in Kenya

Unitarian Women's Group

Friday 26th – Sunday 28th September

at

The Nightingale Centre
Great Hucklow

All Unitarian women and their friends
are invited to come and
join us for fun, friendship and serious
discussion

The theme for the weekend is
"Positive Images of Women and
Images that Kill Us Softly"

Further information/application forms/
bursary details

can be obtained from:

Sue Cooper

Tel: 01926-313896

Email: Suecooper26@aol.com

Even Unitarians need human-like gods

To the Editor:

Once, many people would have known the meaning of the Latin sentence, "Quo vadis?". It means, of course, "Where are you going?", and it is, I think, a question which can validly be asked of modern Unitarianism.

My experience of the movement now covers many years. From it, I have learned a lot. I have been given generous religious instruction by tutors in the United Kingdom, and have been enabled to perceive the truths inherent in Buddhism and in Spiritualism.

But I have also been deeply disillusioned. I have encountered much intolerance, much misplaced superiority in regard to Christian orthodoxy and, in recent times, an appalling breakdown in the promotion of traditional morality. These criticisms apply to both Christian and non-Christian Unitarians.

My understanding is that in the early days of what became Unitarianism in Transylvania, there were those who, whilst rejecting the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, nevertheless believed in the worship of Jesus. But this kind of Unitarianism did not survive, producing what I nowadays consider to have been tragic consequences.

Much of modern Unitarianism is, of course, not very Biblical, and I, for one, would no longer argue from Scripture. But I have become increasingly convinced, from experience with men and women, that the human heart needs human-like gods and goddesses, that Mahayana Buddhism is right in its adoration of the celestial Buddha and Kuan-yin (the beautiful "Chinese Goddess of Mercy") and that the ever-available Christ and Mary are essentials of Christianity.

We need these ever-present, compassionate beings, and should not vainly search, for example, for the true historical Jesus or for an undiscoverable "Supreme Being".

I think that the theological name "Unitarian" has had its day, and should be replaced by such a name as "Inquiring".

Likewise, I think that the censorious re-writing of orthodox hymns and prayers should cease, and that the ones already

rewritten should be discarded. Further, I am not sure that congregational government works well at all.

Surely there must be something seriously wrong with a movement which seems to have an uncanny proclivity for going in wrong directions.

Ross Howard

GA Lay Preacher

Rydalmere NSW

Australia

Selfish agenda drives immigration policy

To the Editor:

As Unitarians, we feel very flattered by R. Willescroft's letter (*Inquirer* 12 July) about immigration, in which he ascribes to us the humanitarian principles behind the ideas of asylum and sanctuary. However, we think that it is only fair to mention that due concern for people suffering political, religious, and even economic persecution is characteristic of all decent people of all kinds of backgrounds, not just Unitarians. Still, Mr Willescroft should take heart: "our" government has, in recent times, allowed a more selfish and even racist agenda to dictate developments in "our" treatment of refugees so "we" are now spurning more distressed foreign people (especially dark-skinned ones) than ever before. Mr Willescroft may believe that they should pay a price for not being born English/British/wealthy/powerful/"free" but some of us are willing to cut them some slack!

Alan Goater

Miriam Walton

Shrewsbury

Euthanasia response:

Dutch system worked

To the Editor:

Re Euthanasia debate (*Inquirer* 26 July)

I have been visiting Nellie in a local Nursing Home. She has been in that bed since the second major stroke took away all her mobility two years ago. Some days she is hoisted out into a chair and wheeled into the lounge and placed in front of a loud television.

It doesn't make much difference to her. She waves her right arm about (the only bit she can move) and rambles on about things that happened years ago. She will say that she has just been out for

fish and chips but actually she is on a diet of soft solids and she is fed with a teaspoon. Sometimes she recognises us and she can smell the flowers we bring. Sometimes she recognises the photographs of her family but mostly she just rambles and waves her arm.

A year ago she developed a chest infection and she was taken into hospital. We all thought that this was it and a peaceful end at last but they filled her with antibiotics and she recovered enough to be sent back to her bed and her rambling and waving. Her house was sold three years ago and has been paying the £640 a week that her care in this home costs.

I compare this to another relative who would have been the same age but lived in Holland. When her terminal illness became unbearable she asked to be released. Doctors and psychiatrists interviewed her to make sure it was her wish and not any one else's. A week later she passed away peacefully with her family beside her.

Tony McNeile

Bolton

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com Or, letters may be submitted on the *Inquirer* web site: www.inquirer.org.uk Click on 'send an article'.

Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

Letters to the Editor

Akbar the Great's city wasn't

To the Editor:

While enjoying the excellent article on bridges by the Rev Margaret Kirk, (*The Inquirer*, May 17) I was reminded of an ironic incident in the career of the very ecumenical Indian emperor, Akbar the Great.

In 1584, this Muslim ruler convened a conference attended by Jains, Jesuits, Parsees and the various sects of Islam and Hinduism, whom he tried, not very successfully, to convert to his new universalist cult of "Divine Faith". They met in a huge new city which Akbar had only just founded. It had been a-building for 14 years.

Over its 'Victory Gate' ('with unconscious irony', as one historian puts it) he had had the following inscription carved:

"Jesus (upon whom be peace) said:

"The world is a bridge. Pass over it, but build no house upon it."

I do not know if Jesus ever said these words, but they proved to be sadly appropriate. When another 14 years had passed, Akbar's breath-taking new city, with all its magnificent palaces, mosques and, yes, gateways, had become a glorious ghost town. The water supply had failed.

(Dr) Michael Topham

Chatham congregation

(See *A Concise History of India* by Francis Watson (Thames and Hudson, London 1974) pp 115-6 and 186, for a brief history of this city Fatehpur Sikri.)

GA voting should emulate Parliament

To the Editor:

I have read with some interest the letter from Mr VC Mason published in your edition of 12th July last on the subject of the voting system at General Assembly meetings.

I must confess that I have not read the Constitution itself. Mr Mason's letter has highlighted one important matter which has never been clear to me.

From time to time I have attended these meetings in a capacity which the GA bureaucracy describes as a 'participant'. Does this mean 'delegate', requiring a 'participant' to vote as a congregation dictates, or does

it mean 'representative', allowing him or her to vote as he or she feels fit? As a law student I was always taught the difference between the two species. As Mr Mason rightly points out, Members of Parliament are representatives who in theory at least are entitled to vote as they please, regardless of their constituents' wishes. I have always made it clear to my own congregation that if they want me to attend General Assembly meetings I would attend as a representative entitling me to vote as I wish, and not as a delegate voting at their behest. For instance, my congregation were broadly in favour of the Task Force 'reforms', but as their representative I voted against these changes to the bitter end. The parliamentary model has stood the test of time, and we would do well to emulate it.

Gavin Lloyd

Cirencester

Bicester

Oxon

Relying on coincidences or science in religiosity

To the Editor:

In his sermon on anti-religious books, Bill Darlison seems to want to have it both ways. He describes Unitarianism as a movement "genuinely open to insights from science". Yet in the same sermon he lambastes those who might like to analyse numerically the fact that all four authors of the books he reviews share the same star sign. He says they would "...push it out of sight into a big box labelled 'coincidence'..."

The probability that four randomly selected people will have the same star sign is about one in 2000.

How do we feel about the unlikeliness of one in 2000? If it were one in 100 trillion, we would think he was really on to something. If it were one in three, we would think it nonsense. We are left in a bit of a grey area. The idea that the link between star sign and anti-religiousness may exist is not "pushed out of sight": just left open to query.

Another issue to consider is that once we start looking for links like this, we will eventually find one. For instance, the first letters of the names of the New Testament gospel writers cluster alphabetically in a very tight group (J,

L, M). The first letters of the first names of the writers of the four anti-religion books all fall well away from this range (A, C, D and R). A remarkable fact?

To refuse to consider seriously such issues leads us to a society with such a feeble understanding of the workings of real science that every partial result published in a "peer reviewed journal" is elevated to the level of hysteria-inducing fact. It also plays straight into the hands of the religiously anti-religious such as Dawkins – someone with whom I discovered from the sermon that I share my birthday. Perhaps there is something in this "pugnacious crusader" business after all.

Jeremy Craven

Sheffield

Where have all the honorifics gone?

To the Editor:

I read Miss Ann L.A. Hughes' letter (*Inquirer*, May 31st) expressing displeasure at the manner of salutation nowadays used on Unitarian mailings from Essex Hall and am in total sympathy.

My extensive working-archive on matters Unitarian records a probable origin for this over-familiarity as I – a very formal Bible Unitarian of over 30 years standing – perceive matters. In the mid-1970s, during an Annual Meetings programme, a participant correctly addressed a speaker as 'Reverend Doctor' and inadvertently provoked a bystander to remark, 'I'm just a plain 'Mister'.

Impromptu diplomatic comment in session (possibly un-minuted) resulted in a well-meaning move towards inequality of titling which continues to this day.

Personally, I regard such iconoclastic trendiness quite unsuited to the dignified environment of ecclesiastical matters and believe that it is 'initiatives' of this kind which impede the credibility of our sacred movement.

David E. Gillman

Leicester



Nigel Ogden at the organ

Musical Extravaganza 5 at Padiham

Padiham's Nazareth Unitarian's 5th concert series begins on 6 September, with International performer Nigel Ogden.

This ever-popular series of concerts draws consistently large audiences from a very wide area. The very high calibre of performers coupled with the most reasonable admission, (£25 for the full set of 5 concerts incl. light refreshments) make them compelling entertainment! We will also make donations at the end of the series to Air Ambulance, and the Children's Heart Surgery Fund.

Nigel has presented the BBC 'The Organist Entertains' for 30 years and is not only a consummate professional over the airwaves but one of the most talented organists around. His keyboard mastery is a joy to watch, (on our large video screen) but even more to listen to. His programme is very varied and covers all musical tastes.

The other concerts in the series are:

15 November – Blackburn Salvation Army Band with soloists

17 January – The Houghton Weavers

7 March – Helen Davies on Glockenspiel Marimba Vibraphone and Xylophone accompanied by the talented James Davy, [the Sub Organist at Blackburn Cathedral] who will also display his brilliance on our splendid organ!

Friday 8 May will conclude the series with 'The Swing Commanders'. This much-travelled group is sensational!

Admission prices for individual concerts are £6 or £7 for Houghton Weavers.

– *Barry Brown*

Unitarians at Manchester Pride

Unitarians will again be joining the Manchester Pride Parade on Saturday, 23 August, supporting lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gendered people. Last year, a group of 11 Unitarians and friends participated for the first time and got a tremendous reception. This year we are looking to have a bigger impact and to fly the Unitarian banner at an event that attracts hundreds of thousands of people to Manchester. All are welcome to come along and join in a leisurely walk around the City Centre. We

may be able to accommodate those wishing to stay over in Manchester. For further information on arrangements please contact Derek McAuley on DMca123@aol.com.

– *Derek McAuley*

Unitarian Women's Group meets at Hucklow in September

The Unitarian Women's Group will be holding its annual weekend at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, on 26 – 28 September. Theme sessions on the topic of 'Images of Women in the Media, with special reference to Pornography and its effects' will be led by a professional psychotherapist and an experienced counsellor. There will also be some feedback on the Anti-Sex Trafficking motion the UWG presented at the 2007 General Assembly. Time in the full and varied programme will also be devoted to worship and meditation and informal contact, including an afternoon exploration of the Peak District.

All open-hearted and lively-minded women are welcome, whether established members or not. For further information please phone Sue Cooper, administrator of the UWG, on 01926 313896 or email: Suecooper26@aol.com

– *Margaret Hamer*

Nominations for Election to the GA Executive Committee

Those who wish to nominate themselves for election to the Executive Committee are asked to contact Popularis Ltd, 6 De Montfort Mews Leicester LE1 7EU (annehock@popularis.org), who have been charged with running the election, on or after 15 September. Popularis will send by email or by post the appropriate documents. These, when complete, are to be submitted to Popularis digitally or by post. However the actual nomination form, countersigned by the Unitarian organisation supporting the nomination, will have to be sent to Popularis by post. Each application received will be acknowledged.

The nomination period opens on 22 September and closes on 20 October. In time for the election period (8 November- 13 December) Popularis will distribute voting forms and explanatory material to congregations for distribution to their members for whom the GA quota for 2007 has been paid.

The names and background of those nominated will be published. It is expected that Unitarians will be able, through a designated section of the GA website, to ask candidates questions with their responses appearing on the website.

– *The Electoral Panel: Alan Ruston, Peter Hewis, Andrew Hill*

The significance of this blessed moment

Meditation on the colour of our lives

An interactive meditation on colour suitable for intergenerational worship.

By John Harley

Let us join together now and take time to celebrate or acknowledge the rich tapestry of colour in our lives. What colours are in your life at this moment? Is there a particular colour that resonates for you or brings you energy?

Artists have feasted on and reacted to colours for centuries. Fernand Leger, the French painter who experimented with cubism, said 'colour is a basic human need....like fire and water, a raw material, indispensable to life'. Claude Monet, the French Impressionist painter, said 'colour is my day-long obsession, joy and torment', while Marc Chagall, the Russian-born painter, said 'In our life there is a single colour, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the colour of love'.

Paul Klee, the Swiss painter who experimented with abstraction, devoted his life to worshipping colour. When staying in Tunisia in 1914 he became overwhelmed by the intense light. He wrote 'colour has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it, it will possess me always, I know it. That is the significance of this blessed moment. Colour and I are one'. Many artists have dedicated their lives to exploring the wonder and mystery of colour. How much do you truly look at the colours around you? There will be some colours you know well. You have come to appreciate every shade and hue like a valued friend.

Let us now take some time to meditate on the colours in our lives. Let's share some moments of silence and when you feel moved I'd like you to say a colour out loud – it might be your favourite colour, or a colour that in some way reflects how you're feeling right now, or a colour that seems to be very much part of your life at the moment.

You may want to express a colour that reminds you of someone to whom you want to bring kind thoughts. We will offer these colours like fragments of prayer. You can say as many as you like. If possible allow a few seconds between your colour and someone else's, so that we can fully appreciate and hear all the colours, but if the colours do overlap don't worry – it'll be as if they are mixing together on a palette!

You may like to close your eyes so that you can imagine each colour as it is spoken. If no colours emerge for you this is fine – just enjoy hearing and absorbing the colours of others.

Let us now be together in stillness and prayer.....

(Hopefully a myriad of colours will be shared spontaneously. The worship leader may like to offer a few colours to keep the momentum going. After many colours have been voiced a natural silence will emerge and when it feels as though participants have expressed their colours freely the following words can be shared.....)

May we honour the colours in our lives.

The colours that bring us energy, those that soothe, and those that lift the spirit.

May I be open to all the colours in my life.

May I be alive to the way they surprise, awaken, transform, and shock me.

May we build a world in which our brothers and sisters can find joy and healing in the colours around them; we pray that



'Purple Heart' by Billy Alexander

Marc Chagall, the Russian-born painter, said, 'In our life there is a single colour, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the colour of love'.

all communities have the freedom to savour the colours of their homeland, their stories and their dreams.

I hope humanity can trust in the colours of the natural world and hear the wisdom they speak. Let us be enriched by the colours we see in each other and may I learn to treasure the full spectrum of colours that make me unique.

Let us guard against painting our world full of bland shades of sameness in our impatient quest for efficiency and standardisation.

May we never forget the destructive colours of war and oppression – give us the strength to create the colours of peace.

Let us teach each other to respect and know the preciousness of colours and the holiness of colour we see in all cultures.

Amen

The Rev John Harley is National Youth Coordinator for the Unitarian General Assembly.

Back cover photo by Dan Shirley



A Hymn for High Summer

When the turtle doves are purring
In the hedgerow and the copse,
And a gentle breeze is playing
Over fields and green tree-tops;

When the white clouds in the blue sky
Cast cool shadows on the earth,
And the meadow grass is stirring,
Swaying to the Spirit's breath;

When, above, the swifts are wheeling
And, below, the wise ants toil,
Garnering the bounteous harvest
Of the sun- and rain-blessed soil:

Souls are touched and, for a moment,
Even sorrow's burden lifts;
We give thanks for all these blessings,
All the summer's countless gifts.

- Cliff Reed